

LAND & LIBERTY

(Incorporating "LAND VALUES.")

Published by THE UNITED COMMITTEE FOR THE
TAXATION OF LAND VALUES.

Twenty-eighth Year. Established June, 1894.

3d. Monthly. By Post 4s. per annum.

United States and Canada, 1 Dollar.

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THE LAND TAXER JUSTIFIED

THE BRADFORD DAILY TELEGRAPH, 19th August, devotes its principal leader, entitled "The Penalty of Enterprise," to an arresting statement of the case which LAND & LIBERTY exists to elucidate. This well-directed editorial says:—

To one section of the people, however, the agitation against the high assessments is a matter of wonder. We refer to the land-taxers, to whom the direction in which things have evolved will cause no surprise whatever. For many years they have prophesied, both in and out of season, very much what has actually happened, because they have always realized that the whole taxation of the country—both imperial and local—is founded upon a wrong basis, and aimed against those least able to pay. The public as a whole, however, has been apathetic until this year, when the last straw was placed upon its shoulders, and if the attainment of that state leads men and women to reflect upon the taxation of land values as an alternative to their present burdens, it will prove a blessing in disguise. The land-taxer has always maintained that the present system of taxation would break down sooner or later, and who is there bold enough to say, in the light of present events, that the breaking point has not been reached? An unparalleled rate burden has been placed upon the people of Bradford and other towns at a time of acute industrial depression, when many thousands of would-be workers are living only by means of the State, and when the struggle to live is paramount. How can these people pay the high rates demanded of them? If they cannot, it is plain proof that the present system has broken down.

One feature of the method of assessment that has particularly struck home in Bradford is the fact that, put in plain words, the more a man improves his property the larger is the rate he is called upon to pay. Of course, this is nothing new, but the public is only just realizing it. The land-taxer has always maintained that the system that placed increasingly heavy rate burdens on the thrifty or enterprising man is both illogical and unfair. The plain fact is that the man who owns a valuable plot of land pays little or nothing towards the expenses of the town in which his land is situated, but if another and more enterprising man purchases it and commences to make good use of it to the advantage of the community he is taxed almost from the moment when the first brick is laid upon it. Those who rail against the present high assessments and taxation generally will do well to ponder upon this elementary article of the land-taxer's faith, and conviction as to the absurdity of the system upon which our taxation is based at present rather than irritation as to the amount of money one is called upon to pay under that system will speedily follow.

This very pertinent statement bearing on the municipal life of the country is entitled to a foremost

place amongst many cuttings and Press comments of a similar character that come to our office for review. It points in plain terms to the threatened breakdown of the present system of raising imperial and local taxation, and puts in a timely word for a review of the land taxer's method of raising the required revenue. So far so good, but it will take more than this isolated word to make an impression in Bradford and district. But that by the way. The article is a sign of the times. If nothing short of bankruptcy will force the land taxers' alternative method of raising revenue to the front, then something in that line is about to be staged.

The land taxers' case is morally justified and its expediency has been proved up to the hilt. It is in practice, as we have shown, in many parts of the British Commonwealth and in several countries beyond its confines. It makes good as the days advance. The value of land is a communal value and should be taken for communal purposes. Not to appropriate this value for the upkeep of the nation means handing over what belongs to the people to some of the people only. Such a misuse of publicly-earned values will continue to be questioned until redress comes to those who suffer by the injustice. That is in brief the positive side of the land taxers' scheme. Its negative side takes form and shape in untaxing and unrating the industrious and enterprising citizen. That is a simple enough explanation of the case. It means the taxation of monopoly and a corresponding relief to industry.

Who opposes the land tax scheme? The Press, the party politicians and the bureaucrats. In the name of reform they put over on the people their own costly anæmic failures which can only be maintained at the expense of the taxpayer. The more these precious schemes are enacted the more the things they were put forward to change remain the same.

Of course there are the land monopolists and their numerous well-trained agencies. But these parasites on production should not count for over-much in the struggle for economic freedom now that political power is in the hands of the people. Those who profit by the existing system of land tenure and taxation would quickly go down to the ranks of honest industry were their victims wisely directed. The issue is clear, the monopolizers of the earth, those who stand at the sources of production empowered by law to fleece all private or public enterprise, those who batten on public values that in the nature of the case accompany industrial development and municipal expansion, those who lay claim to unrestricted ownership of plots of land that must be put to use by a growing community on pain of so much degradation, are not very vulnerable enemies of land value taxation. The real enemies are to be found within the groups and coteries who are determined to have the landowners and not the land taxers on their side. This arrangement gets all kinds of shoddy schemes a footing in the legislature, and once there they can be put through always on the understanding that the public purse is available for any deficit.

In the matter of housing, millions in hard cash have been squandered these past two years, and the net results are general scarcity, high rents and higher rates. The Government under stress of

weather calls a halt in its mad-hatter plan, when it has succeeded in producing a fifth of the houses promised. What happens? The Housing Minister, Dr. Addison, resigns and the Press give him columns—to explain his failure? Not at all. Only to allow him to chatter away by the yard, and moan out his pitiful adherence to the impossible job he had in hand. All he asked for was a few more millions of the taxpayers' money. Let us have money for social reforms is the passionate cry of the waster, and he is in fashion in every political circle, outside the land-tax group.

It is the same with the small-holdings policy enacted to put people back on the land. The Acts provided for adequate compensation to the land-owners, and it was officially reported in 1918 that there were 5,500 fewer small-holdings in England and Wales. A similar story of dismal failure was related in the Annual Report of the Scottish Land Court of 1916, five years after the Scottish Act was passed. "The number of Small-Holdings," it was stated, "has steadily diminished since the commencement of the Act of 1911 which was intended by Parliament for their preservation and encouragement. . . . The Act has been marred by legal ingenuity."

Then we had the labour exchanges, wages boards and unemployment insurance. To-day there is neither labour nor wages for millions of workers, and the insurance policy staggers to the wall under the burden it has to carry.

A labour leader (Mr. J. R. Clynes) declared recently from his place in the House of Commons that "the House is constantly engaged and has been so employed in the past twenty odd years in modifying and in remaking economic laws by fixing wages, hours of work, conditions of service as between man and man, and by a score of different ways has tried to set up a standard of livelihood which men and women could not have enjoyed had they been left to the ordinary mercies and free play of economic laws; and the appeal made from this side of the House to the majority of this House is to continue that necessary human work." There, in a paragraph from Hansard is the type of mind that holds and directs the legislation promoted for social and industrial betterment.

In the Senate, on the platform and in the Press this is the sort of jargon that passes for statesmanship. In this confession of faith the conspiracy of silence on the land question is at its very best. Land monopoly has no place in the debate, and the injury it causes to the workers and to society at large is held up in the name of the Labour Party as "the ordinary mercies and free play of economic law." Prodigious!

It is all so very simple and so easily grasped—this finely-spun theory woven around an effect that superficial thinking makes into a cause of primary importance. It is a game that hurts no one and leads nowhere. The law in economics is the law, no more and no less, and those who set out to break it or "remake" it can only break themselves while they inflict so much torture on the people they seek to benefit.

The question is being put, is the Labour Party fit to govern? Not more fit than the Tory or the Liberal Party, if Mr. Clynes and his following are to be taken seriously. Labour is the producer of all wealth, yet "it cannot fix its own share of the

produce, its hours of work or its conditions of service." Why not? Who or what is in the way of this freedom of contract? Trade depression and unemployment. How is this brought about? The answer to these questions brings us to the abiding cause of the trouble. The Parliamentary adjustment that is needed is one that will set free the natural opportunities that are to be found in the land, and nothing short of this fundamental change will suffice.

This is "the elementary article of the land-taxers' faith." The present system cannot last. In the matter of finance it is rapidly going to pieces. Economic law is remorseless, it will not turn aside even to accommodate the Government. The Prime Minister in his latest platform appeal for grace abounding wants no quack remedies. A quack remedy, as Mr. Lloyd George can say, is a remedy that must be bolstered up and fed with public money. The pathway to the better land of the quacks has been literally paved with gold, and economic law goes to show that the glittering pavement has but taken us along the road that leads to destruction. And still the cry of the quack is give us more money and you shall see what we can do to bring the children of the people into their inheritance.

After well nigh knocking private enterprise in the building trade out of commission, Dr. Addison complacently says it would be a comfort if we could think that private enterprise were likely to continue the work, and further complains that the local authorities are now limited to a sum of £200,000 a year for the improvement of slum areas. The building trade can speak for itself as to its ability successfully to compete with the Whitehall bureaucrats; the "improvement of slum areas" is but another way of stating the case for the time-honoured plan of plundering the taxpayer for the express benefit of slum-property owners.

The £20,000,000 spent this year in Mesopotamia, Dr. Addison contends, represents a sum which equals the total proposed expenditure for all the slums of England and Wales for a hundred years. A one hundred years' job! What a prospect, to say nothing of the calculation! It reads like a modern version of Daniel in the Den of Lions, and it comes not from the pen of an irresponsible person at a street-corner meeting, but from that of an ex-Cabinet Minister.

We hold no correspondence with the opinion that sustains the expenditure in Mesopotamia, but even if that sum were available for housing it would not solve the housing problem. Decent housing conditions are bound up with the solution of the unemployment problem, the problem of wages and the rating problem. These perplexing phenomena cannot be brought up and settled by the payment of any sum of money, whatever the figure may be. The solution is to be found alone in the economic freedom that the land-tax system would inaugurate. The alternative system is the one in operation, and all the costly mending and patchwork cannot keep it going. The land question presses for solution, and we carry on our propaganda with ever increasing assurance that the solution we advocate will yet come to its own. We can take the admission of the BRADFORD DAILY TELEGRAPH as one more tribute to the strength and conviction behind our developing movement. J. P.